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But I Thought It Would FIT!: Musings on the Clash Between Expectations and Reality

Audrey Claire Redmond
2014 Saurman Award Recipient

It's a cold and rainy December night, and, as I do most nights at some point in the evening, I'm reflecting on my day at work. I am now five months into my new job, and calling it my "new" job is starting to feel inappropriate. I feel like it's somehow been longer than five months, the comfort of my cubicle in UVM's Office of Student Life and the security of my cohort are far off memories, and yet there is still so much I am trying to figure out.

As it turns out, today was a hard day. The weather made for a slick and tense commute. Students, already stressed about next week's impending finals, were irritable that classes weren't cancelled. I was pulled into an impromptu meeting with the new Dean and asked to double the number of programs I put on each month. When I got home, my sister called to let me know that my father was not interested in making a big deal about his 60th birthday, for which we'd planned a surprise family party. I'm feeling exhausted, both physically and mentally, and today, as I reflect on this single day, I wonder if I'm in the right place.

Throughout the HESA program, the idea of "fit" came up time and time again. We preached the importance of fit during interview weekends to candidates. We interviewed across campus each semester to find the practicum that best fit. Our final semester, we sought out institutions and positions that fit as we looked for our first positions. For me, fit above all else became the ultimate goal, synonymous with happiness. If I could just find a job that FIT, I would be HAPPY! It seemed so simple!

Tonight, five months into my "new" job, I'm realizing that maybe it doesn't fit me so well. Tonight, my job is that stunning dress in the store window that I just had to have, but once I got home and tried it on, I realized that the sleeves were too tight, the hem too short, and the collar too stiff. Tonight, I kind of want to return the dress and find a different dress, or a pair of pants, or perhaps even a snowsuit.

Audrey Redmond is the Assistant Director of Student Involvement at New England College in Henniker, NH. She remains passionate about assisting students through major life transitions, as well as facilitating student leadership development. She is also passionate about navigating her own transitions in life, and is grateful beyond belief for her partner and his unending support on both the tough days and the terrific days.

“Well, Didn’t You Try It On?”

The job search process was a daunting one. As graduation crept closer and my graduate assistantship wound down, I felt incredibly anxious to find a position. It couldn’t just be any position, though, remember, it had to FIT! When I got invited to interview at my current institution, I recall feeling like it could potentially be a great fit for multiple reasons. Primarily, I grew up in Henniker, New Hampshire, where the college is located. What a natural and smooth transition it would be to return to my hometown! My parents still live in Henniker, and I actually spent the night before my interview at their house, getting ready in my childhood bedroom rather than in a stuffy hotel.

During my on-campus interview, I felt an odd sense of familiarity. Although I had never stepped foot in many of the campus buildings, my childhood was spent walking across the college grounds, creating rollerblade and bike routes with my neighbors. Everyone I met that April day was warm, friendly, and excited to interact with a candidate, which felt fantastic. The job description offered both opportunity for growth and development, as well as familiar duties at which I felt I could excel. When I got the offer, it was a natural and easy “yes.”

But much like the dress in the store window, how could I know if NEC, or Henniker, would fit? Had I really tried it on? Had one day on campus, meeting exemplary students and interacting solely with extremely congenial folks, painted an accurate picture of what my days, weeks, or months would feel like? Might it be difficult to live in the same town as my parents once again? I couldn’t have known the answers to such questions, and so I confidently dove in, expecting the best.

So What *Doesn’t* Fit?

I remember reading the book, “Beginning Your Journey,” in Jill Tarule’s Capstone class and trying to anticipate what my first job post-graduation would be like. Naïvely, I believed that I would be a fantastic entry-level student affairs professional. I would be the best supervisor and the best supervisee, I would make a name for myself in my first year on the job, I would herald the message of social justice to tiny Henniker, and I would be a master at reaching and building relationships with all types of students. My new job would fit perfectly because I would excel at all elements of the position. As it turns out, I am both pieces of a fantastic student affairs professional, and pieces of a novice, nervous, uncertain student affairs professional.

Things I Thought I'd Be Awesome At That Are Actually Really, Really Hard:

Supervising

When I read the job posting and saw that I would have the opportunity to supervise a graduate assistant in the Higher Education program, I was immediately excited. Over my two years as the Orientation Graduate Assistant at UVM, my supervisor and I developed a strong, significant, and fun relationship. She was not only my supervisor, but my mentor and an important female role model. As I imagined my future role as supervisor to a graduate assistant, I envisioned the type of relationship I had with my supervisor at UVM.

I did not take into account that my supervisor at UVM had supervision experience prior to working with me. I did not take into account that, sometimes, despite best intentions and best efforts, personalities don't always gel perfectly. I did not take into account that I would struggle to give constructive feedback or shy away from conflict. I did not take into account that supervising someone for the first time is not easy. I had to accept that my relationship with my graduate assistant would look and feel different than the expectations I had set, and that took some time.

Reaching and Supporting All Types of Students

I developed a LinkedIn profile as I began my job search a year ago, and I crafted the following summary of myself:

Deep passions for building relationships and supporting students through transitions guide my work as a student affairs practitioner. I see people as individuals, with unique needs, goals, and developmental trajectories. I strive to meet them where they are at and then aim to facilitate growth and further development. I am highly disciplined, detail-oriented, forward-thinking, and strategic about the goals that I set, both for myself and for programs and practices. More than anything, I am inspired by the students I serve and by my professional colleagues, and I am excited to continue learning from both groups.

Wow! That set the bar pretty high, didn't it? Apparently, I believed and expected that I would be a master of connecting with, understanding, validating, supporting, challenging, and developing each and every student that stepped foot into my office. I did not consider that the students at my new institution would be vastly different than the students I engaged with at UVM in many ways, or that student involvement and participation would be a struggle. I grew disappointed when students didn't immediately connect with me, or come to me for help, and

I took it personally that sometimes, I just wasn't the resource a student wanted or needed. Theoretically, I believed that I would be able to reach to and support all types of students, especially at a small institution, but once again, expectations clashed with my reality.

Making Social Justice Everyone's Passion

Coming from UVM, and particularly the HESA program, I graduated with a hunger to educate, inform, share, and discuss issues of social justice. Having grown up in Henniker, I was aware of the predominantly White context of both the college and the town and excited to drop knowledge to anyone who would listen! To my surprise (and disdain), very few folks seemed to want to listen. Or talk. Or collaborate. Or attend my programs.

My initial excitement about planning and implementing social justice and multi-cultural programming waned quickly as I realized that, much like many institutions of higher education, this one struggled to create a truly inclusive and supportive environment for all students. While I could play an important role in changing that reality, I felt like my lone voice could not be enough.

Transitioning in General

When I accepted the job, I assumed that moving "home" would be a breeze. I knew where the DMV was! I knew how to get to the grocery store! I already had a few friends in the area, and my parents and sister were all very close by! There would be so much less to navigate with this move than with previous moves, and I believed I would gracefully and smoothly transition my life from Burlington to Henniker, from UVM to my new institution.

As it turns out, transitions are hard.

Living near family again, for the first time in ten years, has been both a blessing and a challenge. My parents' expectations of how often they will see me coupled with the hard realities of their age and their respective healths has made our relationship feel raw and sometimes difficult. I thought I would get to see my childhood best friend regularly, as we now live only twenty minutes from one another, but our jobs and lives often get in the way. As someone who enjoys discovering new shops, restaurants, and hikes, a return to the area in which I was raised left little to discover. The move back to New Hampshire was not as smooth as I had anticipated, and negotiating the disappointment between expectations and reality was sometimes painful.

Learning to Tailor

As I continue to reflect, I realize that much of what doesn't necessarily "fit" about my position is the result of a deep disconnect between expectations and reality. I saw this position and this institution as a great fit because I believed that I could (and would) naturally excel at all aspects of my job. I would immediately be an excellent supervisor; a master at reaching all types of students; a social justice programming guru; the smoothest transition-maker in all the land. As such, my job would be a great fit. The truth, though, is that I was not and could not be a master student affairs professional in my first semester of the work. And when I realized that things were hard, and that I wasn't doing everything perfectly, I deemed the position and the institution as a bad fit. I set the bar extremely high, both for myself and for my first job after graduate school, and it is only now, five months in, that I am realizing that such expectations have tainted my understanding of this experience.

Perhaps best of all, this reflection has afforded me the opportunity to think about what is working, and what does fit. I have a fantastic supervisor who not only believes in me, but who encourages me to try new things. We have fun at work every single day. The students I work with are slowly but surely coming to my office on a regular basis, and the programs we are implementing are only getting more solid. I have the privilege to walk across the street and have lunch with my mother whenever I want, to attend my nephew's basketball games, and to grab a drink with my childhood best friend on a Friday night. I am valued and appreciated by students, staff, and faculty.

And so even on this rainy night, even after a disappointing day, I can appreciate and understand that this is the right place for me, right now. The dress may not be my exact size, but perhaps I should never have expected it to be the perfect fit. With some alterations and a change in expectations, I truly believe that it will look, and more importantly, feel right.